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Department of Agriculture moved to South Perth

Department of Agriculture, Western Australia

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AFTER more than half a century in the historic but time-worn building, one of the few adorned with the British Government crest of the Lion and Unicorn, on the eastern side of the Government Gardens in St. George’s Terrace, the Department of Agriculture has been transferred to a new location in South Perth.

The old building—soon to be demolished to make way for a new Town Hall—was commenced in 1836 and was designed by the Government Architect of that time, Mr. Henry W. Reveley who designed the Round House at Fremantle.

It is on record that the Swan River Colony’s first Legislative Council met on the site in 1832—probably in tents or huts—and after its completion continued to meet in the building until 1870 when it moved to a building which formerly stood on the site of the new Rural and Industries Bank premises now nearing completion.

The colony’s post office was housed in the old building from 1840 to 1853 and again from 1857 to 1867, and the Colonial Secretary had an office there until 1876. In 1890, the Legislative Council returned to the site and continued to meet there until 1904 when it moved to Harvest Terrace and handed over the building to the Department of Agriculture.

The fore-runner to the Department of Agriculture was the Bureau of Agriculture inaugurated in 1894 with headquarters at Weld Chambers in St. George’s Terrace. The Bureau was later moved to West Australian Chambers and in 1898 it was reconstituted as the Department of Agriculture at that address.

During the first half of the present century there was a tremendous expansion of agricultural activity in Western Australia with a corresponding growth of the Department.

The old building soon proved inadequate to house the new branches and divisions which came into being. Staff figures were 229 in 1928 against 742 now, and—prior to
Fig. 2.—One of the new sections

Fig. 3.—A view of two of the blocks showing the ground level and upper floor connecting ways
the erection of the new buildings at South Perth—units of the Department of Agriculture were also located in the Observatory buildings, at the old Orphanage in Adelaide Terrace, in the Treasury Buildings and at the Animal Health and Nutrition Laboratories, Hollywood.

Much of the accommodation was substandard and of a makeshift nature which, together with the widespread dispersal of the units, created a number of administrative problems, yet some of the Department's most creative efforts were made under those conditions.

THE NEW BUILDINGS

The new buildings are the culmination of about fifteen years' striving for a site and the necessary finance. Other sites discussed were just east of Herdsman's Lake, and a St. George's Terrace site alongside Christian Brothers' College.

A 33-acre site in a cleared section of the Collier Pine Plantation was reserved for the Department in South Perth. It is in the northern corner of the plantation, bounded on the north-east by Jarrah Road and on the north-west by George Street. The site is easily reached from all main country highways without entering the city.

The foundation stone for the first block of buildings was laid by the then Minister for Agriculture (the Hon. E. K. Hoar, M.L.A.), on April 5, 1956.

The three main laboratory and office blocks are two-storey buildings of reinforced concrete construction. Columns, beams and flooring slabs were pre-cast on the site. The bays between the columns are in-filled with steel frames, windows, and half-inch thick asbestos-cement panels. Vermiculite concrete blocks are used internally to form an insulating dado wall from floor to window-sill height and acoustic tile panels are fixed between the steel roof members which support the five-degree corrugated asbestos roofing.

The blocks are 38 ft. wide internally divided by central corridors 5 ft. wide to leave 19 ft. on the south side for laboratories and approximately 13 ft. on the north side for offices. Each block has its axis running east and west giving north lighting for the offices and south lighting for the laboratories.

There are many unique features in construction some of which have been copied in scientific buildings elsewhere.

Flexibility is the keynote of the design and internal division is by 2 in. thick plaster partitions which are movable and
may be readily re-positioned at approximately 3 ft. 6 in. centres. Benches are in long runs to facilitate re-positioning of the partitions and movable cupboard and drawer units under the benches slide on runners and may be re-arranged as required.

All internal drainage from sinks is by acid-proof polythene plastic which may be cut and welded as required to suit any re-positioning.

Gas, electricity and hot and cold water services all run on brackets under the benches with take-offs at approximately 7 ft. intervals in skirtings above the benches.

All rooms are mechanically ventilated from a central installation and heated by black rod heaters built into the internal face of the vermiculite concrete wall.

Portable fire extinguishers throughout the blocks and fire hydrants in the grounds
provide normal protection against fire, but separate automatic carbon dioxide installations are installed to guard irreplaceable botanical collections in the State Herbarium and the extensive collection of insects in the Entomological Branch.

Ancillary buildings include two large stores’ buildings, three modern animal houses, a series of glass-houses and service buildings, a caretaker’s cottage, and a fully-enclosed hard standing of 11,000 square feet for Departmental vehicles. There are adequate parking facilities for staff and visitors.

Another large block to house the administrative sections and Accounts Branch of the Department is now under construction. Local materials and local manufacture were used wherever possible.

All the technical branches and divisions of the Department of Agriculture are now established in the new buildings which were officially opened by the Premier (the Hon. David Brand), at 4 p.m. on August 26.

Fig. 7.—Unveiling a plaque at the official opening

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